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Our *Presidential Librari*

Allegations that President Clinton pardoned Marc Rich pa in return for donations to his presidential library have ra questions about the value of such institutions and the fed appropriations that support them. In raising funds for his brary from friends and supporters, Clinton followed a tradit established by Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt and con ued by all subsequent Presidents. Private contributors have fun the ten presidential libraries and museums, which with the exc tion of the Nixon Library were then given to the governme Nixon's library will also become a ward of the National Archi once his papers and tapes are processed and deposited there.

The Clinton flap has exposed all these presidential reposit ries to public fire. "Why do these white elephants exist at all Eric Gibson asked in the *Wall Street Journal*. Presidential librari Gibson complains, have lost touch with the "tasteful beginning evident at the FDR site. "Nowadays they look like the fruit an unholy alliance between the Smithsonian and Graceland-repositories doubling as shrines to a personality cult." FDR's Hyc Park facility "plays up the Hundred Days and plays down th packing of the Supreme Court," Gibson says. "JFK's library cel brates the Cuban Missile Crisis while having strangely little to sa about the Bay of Pigs invasion or the Diem assassination."

Gibson's complaint is not without merit. The museum tied t each of the libraries is a forum for celebrating the President's lif and Administration. These museums *do* put their best foot forwar but a country needs people it can look up to. And each of the te Presidents memorialized in their museums had some—and i FDR's case, considerable—virtues worth remembering.

Gibson believes we would be better off if we housed presiden tial papers at the National Archives. But if the tens of millions o papers and the thousands of hours of tapes and oral histories ir the presidential libraries went into the archives, it would limit the availability of these records to biographers and historians and im poverish the public's understanding of twentieth-century US his tory and the institution of the presidency. The libraries do a superb job of organizing these vast collections and making them available in a timely fashion to anyone with a legitimate research interest.

Questions about whether Clinton exchanged donations to his library for pardons can serve at least one useful purpose. Let's avoid future allegations of this kind by providing federal funds to build and administer all future presidential libraries. A nation with a $1.96 trillion national budget can afford to be generous in support of historical studies.

It's not as if the country is so well informed about its past that we can take historical knowledge for granted. A survey in the *New York Times* of 556 seniors at fifty-five leading colleges and univer sities revealed that these young people knew more about Beavis and Butt-Head than about George Washington and Abraham Lin coln. Where 99 percent of those surveyed could identify the TV cartoon characters, 40 percent could not correctly name the fifty year period in which the Civil War occurred. Only one student in the survey answered all of the thirty-four high-school-level ques tions correctly; the average score was a troubling 53 percent.